Abstract

Text-based computer-mediated communication is one of the most ubiquitous forms of communication. This dissertation explores interaction in computer-mediated communication from the psycholinguistic perspective, i.e. from a perspective that is primarily concerned with the mechanisms of language production and comprehension. The thesis focuses on two issues associated with interaction: alignment between speakers (imitation in terms of syntax and lexis) and turn-taking (switching between speakers in a conversation).

Online interaction was selected as the subject of the thesis for two reasons. Primarily, the choice was dictated by the fact that relatively little attention in psycholinguistics is paid to language production and comprehension in interaction despite the fact that it is the main locus of language use (Pickering & Garrod, 2004). The second reason is that despite its ubiquity, text-based computer-mediated communication is underrepresented in psycholinguistic research – isolated spoken production and comprehension have so far been the primary concern of psycholinguistics.

Previous studies in corpus linguistics and conversation analysis have observed differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face interaction in terms of language use (Yates, 1996; Jonsson, 2015) and in terms of turn-taking (Baron, 2010; Anderson et al., 2010; Tudini, 2015). However, these differences have so far not been considered from the psycholinguistic perspective. Here, it is hypothesised that the differences stem from the fact that interactans have to communicate via a constrained medium of communication, and therefore have to adapt their language use in order to minimise the costs of communication.

To test the hypothesis, three studies were conducted that used research methods from psycholinguistics, natural language processing, and corpus linguistics. Two studies explored alignment and one investigated turn-taking. The results of the two studies suggest that alignment can be observed in text-based communication and that there is more imitation between interlocutors in computer-mediated communication in terms of syntax, which might be an attempt at minimising costs of achieving a communicative goal. The third study also showed that turn-taking strategies applied by the writers have an influence on information integration.

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